DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 272 573 TM 860 489

AUTHOR	Wilkinson, Louise Cherry
TITLE	Assessing Students' Social and Communicative Competence in School.
SPONS AGENCY	National Center for Education Statistics (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	[Oct 85]
NOTE	10p.; In: Invited Papers: Elementary/Secondary Education Data Redesign Project, October 1985; TM 860 450.
PUB TYPE	Viewpoints (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; Classroom Environment; *Classroom Research; *Communicative Competence (Languages); *Data Collection; Elementary Secondary Education; *Information Needs; *Interpersonal Competence; *Language Tests; Research Needs
IDENTIFIERS	National Center for Education Statistics

ABSTRACT

Two major areas are recommended in the redesign of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data collection: assessment of social and communicative competence, and description of classroom processes. Social and communicative competence are important achievements of the school-age years and are heavily influenced by classroom experiences. Academic, social, and communicative achievements are interrelated. To expand descriptions of students' achievement and competence in the classrooms, a model is presented. The effective speaker, who is successful in communicating with others, receives appropriate responses to requests. Appropriate speakers have been found to produce effective responses and to have the highest achievement test scores in reading and mathematics. The communicative climate of the classroom may help to encourage individual differences in achievement. To measure social and communicative competence, direct classroom observation is suggested. One could assess social problem solving, effective communication, moral reasoning, understanding of social relationships, and self-concept. It is also important to observe communication in the small instructional classroom group: (1) conditions under which the student successfully requests and obtains information; (2) variety of attempts to obtain information; and (3) response when information is not obtained. Assessment of young children is encouraged. (GDC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED272573

Assessing Students' Social and Communicative Competence in School

Louise Cherry Wilkinson
City University of New York, Graduate School

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
S. Mauchamer

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☑ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

TM 860 489

Assessing Students' Social and Communicative Competence in School

Louise Cherry Wilkinson
City University of New York, Graduate School

As part of the national effort to measure the progress of elementary and secondary students in American schools, their social and communicative performance should be assessed, and the classrooms in which they acquire knowledge should be described. I share the position held by many educators that the educational statistics collected about our children and about our schools have had limited utility and questionable validity.

Past surveys of the status of American education have not fully described, nor have they validly predicted the ways in which students learn and achieve in school. One reason for this failure is that the prior analyses have not included descriptions of classrooms. Another reason is that they have not included measures of important aspects of school-age children's social and communicative knowledge. Social knowledge includes the ability to perform functionally appropriate interpersonal behaviors, while communicative knowledge includes the ability to use verbal and vocal expression to communicate. Achieving a sense of autonomy and responsibility, communicating effectively with others, cooperating with others and solving interpersonal problems, are all within these domains of knowledge. They change dramatically during the school-age years and are heavily influenced by students' experiences in classrooms. Social and communicative competence are important achievements that the educational system can either foster or discourage. They should, therefore, be included in

descriptions of American education.

In this paper, I comment on the present state of statistical descriptions of American education. Then I discuss the need for new measures that assess the social and communicative competence of students and the climate of their classrooms. Finally, I offer some suggestions for more comprehensive assessments.

Descriptions of Students' Achievement and Their Classrooms

Over the years, large amounts of information have been collected on student characteristics and student outcomes as indicators of the state of American education. It is appropriate and logical that these descriptions focus on students' academic achievement in specific curricular areas, such as arithmetic or reading, and basic verbal, spatial, and mathematical aptitudes. Past reports by NCES are replete with descriptions such as the following: "SAT Scores for Students 1963-1984," "Eighth grade Mathematics Achievement," "National Assessment of Educational Progress in Reading for Ages 9, 13, 17, by Selected Characteristics of Participants in the United States, 1974-1975, and 1979-1980." These reports are deficient in two areas. (1) They neglect social and communicative competence. (2) They contain virtually no information on the classrooms in which students are taught. There is modest information about students with limited English proficiency and some information on foreign-language enrollments, such as the following: "The Percent of 5 to 17-year-olds that Speak a Language Other Than English at Home," "Estimated Language Minority Status and English Language Proficiency of Population 5 to 14-year-olds, 1976 to 1982," and "The Mean Number of Carnegie Units Earned by Selected Subject Matter Areas (Foreign Languages)."

Expanding Descriptions of Students' Achievement and Classrooms

One reason for measuring students' social and communicative competence in classrooms is that this knowledge mediates both the teaching and learning of academic subjects. Social and communicative competence limits the extent to which students can benefit from the instruction in academic subjects such as reading or mathematics. For example, recent research in sociolinguistic studies of classrooms provides evidence that for some students, the ways of communicating at school differ from those at home (Wilkinson, 1982). Discontinuities between the classroom and other learning environments, such as the home, may cause special problems for some students that can interfere with their overall achievement and adjustment in school. Some culturally diverse students do not know, nor are they taught the "rules of the game"--the standard ways of communicating in classrooms, such as how, when, and where to ask for and provide information to teachers and other students. The effects of students' lack of knowledge about classrooms are not limited to the obvious problems that these students face in their failure to communicate adequately. In addition to such immediate problems, if some children do not understand the classroom with its unique communicative demands, then they learn little from the instruction they receive. Inadequate learning of how to communicate in classrooms has unintended effects that include lack of understanding and inability to function in classrooms. This problem is demonstrated, for example, by students misunderstandings of the curriculum and by teachers' lowered expectations that can then result in their differential treatment of students. Furthermore, accurate assessment of the student's achievement is unlikely, since access to their knowledge is predicated upon good

communication. Perhaps the educational failure of some students, as documented by educational statistics, is caused in part by differences in communication between students and teachers who come from different cultural backgrounds.

My studies of students and classrooms provide an example of the interrelationship among academic, social, and communicative achievements. During the past several years, my colleagues and I have been especially interested in how students provide information to one and other, and how they use requests and responses in instructional groups in which the teacher is often absent. Making requests, such as asking for information, and receiving adequate responses, such as correct answers, are central to teaching and learning in classrooms. Children often use requests to provide information for each other as well as to guide their behavior. Requests are common in classrooms, accounting for about two-thirds of all of the teachers' speech, and more than one-half of students' speech.

We conducted research on students' in small instructional groups and proposed a model that describes students' use of requests and responses in these groups. The central idea of the model is the concept of the effective speaker, who is successful in communicating with others. In the case of requests, an effective speaker is defined as one who receives appropriate responses to requests. Our model identifies several characteristics of requests that are associated with obtaining appropriate responses for elementary school children; these characteristics include requests that are expressed clearly and directly, that have to do with the academic task at hand, that are understood by other students as sincere, and that are revised if they do not initially result in obtaining an appropriate responses. The results of four studies of

elementary school students from first through third grades that we conducted during the past several years provide support for our model (Wilkinson, 1982, 1983). Requests that conform to the model are most likely to result in students' obtaining appropriate responses during their reading and mathematics in small, instructional groups. One of the most provocative findings from the research is that students who were effective in obtaining appropriate responses not only produced requests that conformed to our model but were also the highest achievers in reading and mathematics as measured by standardized tests. Our work and that of other researchers suggests that the communicative climate of the classroom may help to maintain and encourage differences among students in their mathematics and reading achievement. Initial differences among students in their academic achievement and communicative knowledge may contribute to what they actually learn in classrooms and thus affect their performance on standardized tests.

Assessing Students' Social and Communicative Competence in Classrooms

We should develop and administer assessments of students' social and communicative competence in classrooms. A set of educational statistics that purports to describe the state of American education should include measurements of the social and communicative competence of school-age children. I will suggest a way of developing adequate indicators that accurately reflect students'competence in these areas.

The task of measuring social and communicative competence of school-age children in school is difficult, because there is no standardized, group-administered test that accurately and comprehensively assesses these competencies. To the contrary,

research suggests that measurement of these competencies is more accurately reflected by direct observation of students' actual behavior in classrooms than by test scores.

Any attempt to measure social and communicative competence should be guided by the current state of scientific knowledge. The design of assessments should be guided by contemporary theory in child development and learning. For example, one could assess children's ability to solve social problems (e.g. Chandler, 1973), to communicate effectively (e.g. Krauss & Glucksberg, 1969), to reason about complex moral issues (e.g. Kohlberg, 1976), to know about the social relationships in classrooms (e.g. Cohen, 1984), and to understand self-concept (e.g. Harter, 1984).

It is essential, however, that assessments also include samples of students' natural behavior as it occurs in classroom. For example, we have constructed profiles for each student based on his/her communicative effectiveness in one classroom situation: the small, instructional group. In our research (Wilkinson, 1982, 1983) the profile includes the following: (1) the conditions under which the student's requests are successful in obtaining information, (2) the variety of ways in which the student tries to obtain information, and (3) the student's response if the information is not obtained. After collecting such profiles, we must consider the norms against which the profiles are compared. Importantly, we must be sensitive to differences that are primarily due to the individual, versus the culture (e.g. dialect) or the situation (e.g. a classroom situation when the teacher is absent).

The design of future assessments of students' achievement in classrooms should include both longitudinal and cross-sectional designs, so that trends in students' social, communicative, and academic achievement can be noted. If there is a trend of note

(e.g. a decline in third-grade students' reading scores), it may be worthwhile to collect more information.

Assessments should be administered early in students' school years, for two reasons. (1) Educators and policy makers need information on the state of young children to guide decisions about early childhood education. (2) Contemporary research in child development and learning has established that subsequent achievement in all domains of knowledge is heavily influenced by students' early learning and experiences in and outside of classrooms. It would be helpful to understand the root of a trend to guide subsequent decision making.

Conclusion

In sum, future reports on American education should include the following. (1) They should address students' social and communicative competence in addition to their achievement in specific curricular areas, such as reading or mathematics. (2) They should include direct observation of students' naturally occurring behavior in a variety of classroom situations. (3) They should carefully take into account differences among students that are due to cultural and situational factors, and true individual differences among students.

NCES should play a strong role in developing and administering a new set of assessment tools that more adequately reflect the state of American education at any point in time. Finally, any effort to chronicle American education that extends into the next century must include a national commitment to support basic research into children's learning and development in classrooms. This is a necessary investment if we are to have the needed tools in the future to carry on with this important endeavor.

References

Chandler, M. (1973) Egocentrism and antisocial behavior: The assessment and training of social perspective-taking skills. Developmental Psychology, 9, (3), 326-332.

Cohen, E. (1984) Talking and working together: Status, interaction, and learning. In P. Peterson, L. C. Wilkinson, & M. Hallinan (Eds.) The social context of instruction, Orlando, FL: Academic Press.

Harter, S.(1984) Developmental perspectives on the self-system. In M. Hetherington (Ed.) Handbook of Child Psychology, Volume IV Socialization, Personality, and Social Development, 4th Edition, New York, Wiley.

Kohlberg, L. (1976) Moral stages and moralization: The cognitive-developmental approach. In T. Lickona (Ed.) Moral development and behavior. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.

Wilkinson, L. Cherry (1982) Communicating in the classroom. New York: Academic Press.

Wilkinson, L. Cherry & Calculator, S. (1982) Requests and responses in peer-directed reading ability groups. American Educational Research Journal, 19 (1), 107-120.

Wilkinson, L. Cherry & Spinelli, F. (1983) Using requests effectively in peer-instructional groups. American Educational Research Journal, 20 (4), 479-502.